

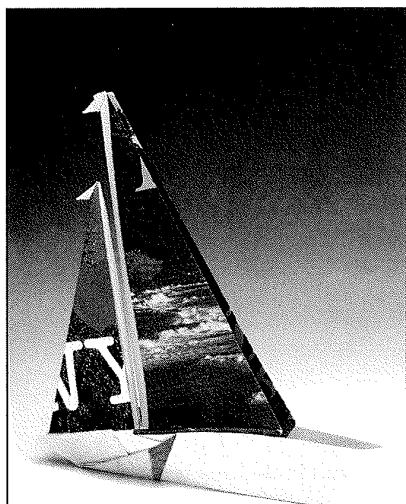
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THE

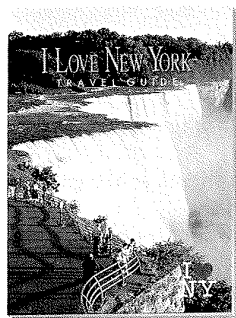
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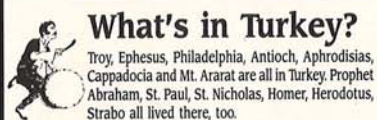
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POPULAR CHRONICLES

THIS IS PERFECT

Tastemaker of the moment Rose Tarlow dictates the way Hollywood moguls of the moment should live, and won't stop until the place is perfect.

BY SUSAN ORLEAN

GETTING Rose Tarlow to decorate your house is not an easy thing. To start with, you have to be extremely persuasive. Sometimes it is easier to buy a nice house than to talk Tarlow into decorating it. This is what happened in David Geffen's case. A few years ago, Jack Warner's house was up for sale. The Warner house is a big place in Bel-Air, with five bedrooms, a screening room, a sunroom, a nursery suite, and an office; there's eighteenth-century wood panelling in some rooms and Art Deco detailing in others; and there are tennis courts, a neoclassical swimming pool, a golf course, a caddy shack, a maids' house, and twelve acres of woods, lawns, formal gardens, informal gardens, driveways, a pergola, a fountain, classical stone statuary, and panoramic views. Geffen had a long-standing fondness for this house, so when Jack Warner's widow died and her estate put the house on the market he snapped it up for forty-seven and a half million dollars. Easy. Then he started pestering Tarlow

Tarlow's favorite thing in the world is to say that she is not a decorator. Nonetheless, everyone in Hollywood with a couple of million dollars and some nagging insecurities about furniture wants her to decorate his or her house. She says that because Geffen is a friend of hers she agreed to take a look at the contents of the Warner house—for forty-



David Geffen finally got Tarlow—who doesn't do houses—to do his, and it will be one of the best in town.

to fix it up. "I was absolutely not interested," Tarlow says. "He kept asking. I kept saying no. I think no one ever says no to David, so I kept him intrigued."

Tarlow, a furniture designer, an *antiquaire*, the owner of a tony design shop in Los Angeles, and a person of famously good taste, had decorated only a couple of places before this: a thirty-thousand-square-foot house belonging to a very rich family in Australia; Edgar Bergen's old house in Holmby Hills, which is now owned by a film producer; and Barbara Walters' house in Bel-Air.

seven and a half million, it came with some old chairs and stuff—so she gave Geffen her opinion of the antiques, and then she found herself shopping with him for furniture, and then she began drawing plans for building a new pool house and reorganizing some of the bedroom space, and the next thing she knew she was dispatching workmen to tear down walls, rip up plumbing, recess light switches behind hand-carved panelling, cut ceilings for skylights, and stain floors five times to get the perfect golden hue. That was two and a half years ago.

DEMETRIOS PSILLOS

She is still working on the house, and figures it will be another year or so until she is satisfied that she has got it right.

Tarlow says that she finally consented to do the Warner house because David Geffen is very charming and very persistent, but the real reason is that if Tarlow is around anything that she doesn't think is perfect, she cannot restrain herself for very long from trying to make it so. Things other people might not mind looking at—telephones, minor Picassos, rolls of toilet paper, and forty-seven-and-a-half-million-dollar not quite finished fixer-uppers—drive her crazy. She is also so discerning that it's scary. She will glance at what appears to be, say, a bouquet of flowers, a big brown chair, an O.K.-looking lamp, and an old toy horse, and in an instant declare one awful, one terrible, one a horrible mess, and one just perfect, not necessarily in that order and not necessarily referring to qualities that a less discerning person would have noticed. The unnerving thing is that as soon as she makes the declarations they seem plainly right. During a few days I spent with her, I would try to guess ahead of time which things Tarlow liked and which she found hideously deficient. I would also try to identify themes. I woke up one morning thinking about a few things in her house—specifically, some gigantic paving stones and a pair of big carved horses from Thailand—and suddenly thought, I get it! She likes large objects only! And when I saw her next I mentioned casually that it seemed that her taste was strictly for furniture and objects of monumental scale. She looked slightly impatient and said, "Not necessarily. Something small can be perfect. It doesn't have to be big." She dug around on her desk and picked up a palm-size sterling-silver flask covered with woven straw and said, "See this? This is perfect. This is really good. It isn't big, is it?" I conceded that it was indeed not big, and then spent the next hour or so trying to figure out what a little silver flask had in common with huge slabs of French stone and a pair of big white seventeenth-century carved horses. It was a little like taking an I.Q. test and having to pick out the right pair of twins. I flunked most of my attempts. After guessing that the theme of her taste was loyalty to large objects, I tried rustic, then French, then wooden, and then a sort of meta-theme of "enormous quan-

ties of anything massed together in an interesting way." These were also wrong. I thought that at the very least it was clear that she liked only old things—after all, she had run a distinguished antique business, and she designs furniture that is adapted from old pieces—and one day I mentioned this in the most offhand way, since I thought it was so obvious. She raised her eyebrows and then said that the next place she intends to live in is an extremely contemporary house, which she plans to design herself. At that point, I stopped making guesses. Tarlow does love many rustic, French, wooden, old, and massed-together-in-interesting-ways things, but that is not the whole picture—the whole picture is something more subtle and more deeply wired inside her head. If you ask her to explain it, she says, "I like really good things. Simple things. I like anything interesting. I know it when I see it."

TARLOW has always lived in pretty places. She was born in Shanghai, but when she was still a baby her family moved to New York. She grew up in an apartment on Fifth Avenue near the Frick Museum, and in a summer house on the ocean in Deal, New Jersey, which was so big that when it burned down its yard was used as the site for a beach club and about a dozen ordinary-size houses. Every summer, Tarlow would repaint her bedroom and rearrange the furniture in an effort to get the room exactly right. She also enjoyed assembling things on her mantelpiece in a visually satisfying way. This was when she was a little kid. If you were the owner of a forty-seven-and-a-half-million-dollar house, you would undoubtedly find it reassuring to know that the person putting it together for you had a good-looking bedroom when she was ten. Tarlow went to boarding school in New Jersey; when she reminisces about her years there, she gets sentimental over the *boiserie*, and the petrified-wood panelling in the bathrooms of the dorms.

Tarlow has the sort of mature aspect of someone who has probably always looked adult. She is now in her late forties. She has smooth chestnut hair, dark arched eyebrows, and an assertive jawline. She once told me she hates being called petite, but she is in fact petite. Her clothes are conservative, dark, tidy, and refined—the clothes of some-

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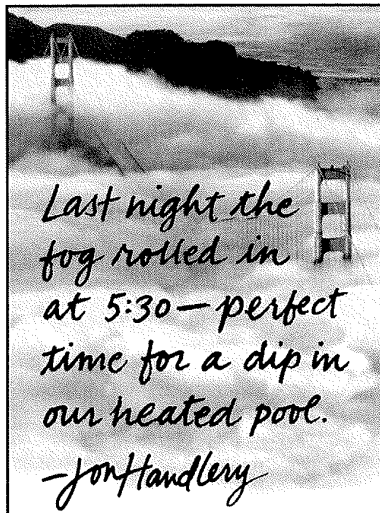
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one who doesn't love clothes but knows what nice ones look like. In a million years, you could not imagine her in a Southern California-style pastel nylon appliquéd warmup suit, shopping at a mini-mall. She seems to like to be a little mysterious. People who know her have described her to me as prickly and imperious and impatient, but she mainly comes across as nonchalant—someone who is unshakably sure of her own mind. She makes a lot of powerful, definitive statements in a voice of absolutely flat affect, probably because she doesn't expect to have to argue any of her points. In particular, she has an unspectacular way of dismissing what other people might find impressive. This can include her own accomplishments, which she usually waves off as accidental, or as the result of having been coerced, or as something she never intended, or, at the very least, as something that she would now gladly abandon for a life of working on her watercolor paintings or taking her horses for a ride. If her standards aren't met, she can be cavalier about other people's accomplishments as well. Once, she took me to a house that had an extensive collection of paintings, including Picassos, Franz Klines, and Mirós. As we were leaving, she said, "Did you see those paintings?" I assumed that she meant they were dazzling. Instead, she rolled her eyes and said, "They were just awful. Terrible. And all over the place."

ONE recent afternoon, Tarlow dropped by to see how the work on the Warner house was proceeding. "It's a big project," Tarlow said. "We've been at it for two and a half years so far, but this kind of house is slow." As she was parking, she motioned toward a row of garden statues and said, "This is going. All this. Awful. All the gingerbread on the outside of the house: going. All of it. We're simplifying. The place was a mess. We're getting rid of all the horrible stuff. When we're done, it's going to be the best house in town."

A workman walked out onto the driveway, holding a piece of wood that looked like walnut. "Rose, come look at this floor," he said. "This is the twelfth sample I've stained, and I think we've finally got the color."

Tarlow got out of the car, examined the piece, remarked that she didn't like

the color on one part of the wood, and said to the workman, "Try it one more time. We're close. We're really close. Once more and I think it'll be right." After he left, she said, "I told David when I started this that I was going to spend all his money. He said that would be fine. We have a great working relationship. He's really interested in what's going on." She crossed the foyer and stood in what will eventually be the dining area, with double-height ceilings, dentil molding, inlaid floors, and three walls of windows. Any fewer than twenty people would feel lost in this room. "This is perfect for David," Tarlow said. "He prefers to entertain informally."

She strolled through the "gossip room" (oval-shaped, and soon to include a black marble sink with a foot-operated faucet and a rare Japanese screen), the nursery (scheduled to become the gym), Jack Warner's old office (lined in butter-colored crackled leather, which will be left untouched), dining-room-size bedrooms, bedroom-size bathrooms, and the downstairs screening room. Most of the house is still raw wood, scaffolding, drop cloths, and sawhorses, but it is possible to imagine it turning out to be a good-looking place. After giving some instructions to the floor man and the wall man, Tarlow went outside to inspect a sample of trim that would replace the curlicues Jack Warner had installed under the eaves. "No, no, I don't like it," she told the carpenter. "I want something with more of an angle on the bottom. It has to be like this." She took a pencil from his shirt pocket and marked on the piece of trim in his hand.

"Rose, they don't have anything like that," the carpenter said, looking sheepish.

She cocked her head and said, "Well, then, let's make it."

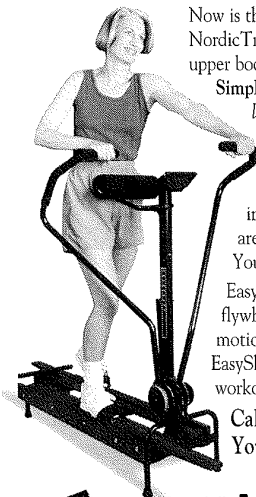
OFTEN, Tarlow has found herself in the position of having to make something herself in order to satisfy her taste. When she was a young woman, newly married, in Los Angeles, she decided to get into the antique business. Her husband staked her to fifty-five thousand dollars toward her first batch of inventory, and she went to Paris to buy. She had, in the meantime, rented a space on a fancy block of Melrose Place, in Los Angeles. She didn't know much about running a business, but she knew she wanted to sell interesting

things she really liked. She went to Paris and spent her fifty-five thousand dollars at antique shops and at the flea market. The shipper, who was responsible for picking up the merchandise and sending it back to her otherwise empty store, took the money, lost it all at the racetrack, and then killed himself. Approximately half of what Tarlow had paid for made its way to Los Angeles, but it was not half a shipment of whole pieces—it was a whole shipment of halves and quarters of pieces: parts of armoires and chunks of chairs. At this point, Tarlow learned very quickly how to build furniture and re-create antique finishes on wood. With the store's opening imminent, she was so far behind and so understaffed and had her hands so full with her two young sons that her hairdresser came in to help set things up. This was 1975, when there were few fine-antique dealers in Los Angeles, and even fewer who were selling antiques that were half old and half new. As Tarlow remembers it, most people in Los Angeles at that time thought the zenith of interior design was exposed brick, a pool table, English pub signs, and clean towels by the Jacuzzi. In her store, which is known formally as Rose Tarlow / Melrose House, she had an enormous birdcage filled with bright-colored finches, and high-end Oriental and French antiques. Somehow, it was a success from the day it opened.

Tarlow decided that her retailing rule of thumb was to be nice to everyone. One day, she was nice to an unassuming Japanese man who wandered into the shop. He told her that someday he would come back and buy everything in her store. A month later, he came back and bought everything in her store. Another time, a decorator came in and said he was having trouble finding a particular kind of chair, so Tarlow decided to design it for him, because, she says, she thought it would help him out, and it would be fun to try, and she had nothing better to do at that moment. Coincidentally, the European wholesale antique market was getting wildly inflated: a Régence chair that she used to be able to find for seven thousand dollars was now twenty-four thousand, and to make it worth finding, shipping, and presenting in a store in this country meant marking it up to a price no one would pay. Tarlow discovered that she was

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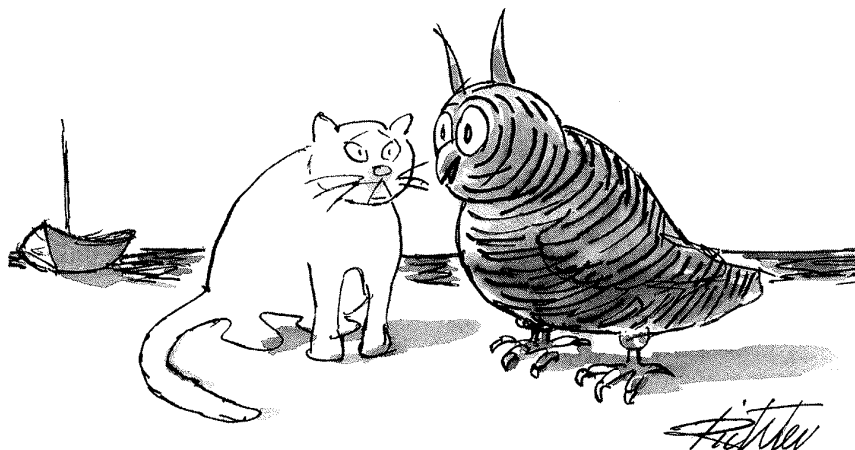
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"I won't lie. There have been other pussycats."

good at designing furniture—she would take inspiration from a classic piece and then fiddle with some of the details—and she also discovered that it was more profitable than rooting around for rare and overpriced originals. She now sells much more furniture of her own design than antiques.

After Tarlow and her husband were divorced, they sold their Brentwood house to Linda Ronstadt. The house Tarlow lives in now, in Bel-Air, is on the edge of a sheer hill. When the house was being built, construction material being delivered would have to be off-loaded from a normal-sized truck at the bottom of the driveway and divided into loads that would fit on trucks tiny enough to make it up the hill. Tarlow designed the house herself and then had an engineer draft the blueprints for it. It is L-shaped, with huge, high windows, creamy stucco walls, and Boston ivy growing on the interior living-room walls. Most of the furniture and the other objects in the house are ivory or brown or white. Modern necessities, like telephones and toilets, are concealed in antique wooden boxes. The floor in the living room is seventeenth- and eighteenth-century oak, from France, and the one in the dining room is thick old stone from the French countryside. The ceilings are crossed with molasses-colored beams from an eleventh-century church in Kent, England. It took five trips to bring the beams up the hill. The deliverymen left the beams in a pile at the top of the driveway, where they looked alarmingly like a gigantic order

of Chinese spareribs. The fact that Tarlow had never taken any courses in architecture did not faze her, but the sight of the family-size order of ribs gave her a start. Over all, the place has the rugged, sunny, otherworldly ambience of an old California mission. After I saw it, I wanted a house just like it. This emotion has overwhelmed other people as well. Some of them have even scraped together the spare change to do something about it. One developer in California recently cribbed her design and built a copy of the house. It occurred to me that in addition to being an antique dealer, a furniture designer, a textile designer (she is now creating fabrics for the textile company Scalmandré), a tableware designer (she is also making dishes and silverware for Swid Powell), and a decorator, Tarlow might be interested in becoming an architect. "No interest whatsoever," she said. "I only wanted to make my own perfect place."

AFTER Tarlow had looked in on the work on the Warner house, she decided to drive out to Silver Lake to check on her finisher. She got lost on the way, and had to call her office from her car phone to have someone there tell her where she was. Eventually, she arrived at the shop. She strolled with the finisher through stacks of club chairs, occasional tables, sideboards, chandeliers, bookcases, desks, bureaus, and knickknacks. Some were old pieces to be tidied up and put in Geffen's house. Others were pieces from Tarlow's line that had been ordered by decorators

from her showroom: a big black-lacquered cabinet with chinoiserie detailing, inspired by a seventeenth-century Japanese piece; a Louis XIII-style side chair, which she makes with a wider seat and slightly pigeon-toed legs; her Regency-inspired dining table, with tapering, reeded legs; a Tuscan-style side table with corkscrew legs; and a straight-legged Louis XVI-style desk, which she makes bigger, sleeker, and less detailed than a true Louis XVI. Ordering upscale designer furniture is like buying couture clothing: it can be altered according to the client's whim. At the finishing shop, for instance, we came upon some tables and consoles of Tarlow's that she had originally produced in burnished dark wood with lacy silver inlays and that were now being made to order for a foreign potentate who wanted them inlaid with gold leaf and painted bright green. The sight of these pieces made Tarlow look, for a moment, a little woozy. The finisher ran his finger over the edge of one of the green pieces, then shrugged at her and smiled. Tarlow smiled back. "This is why I stay away," she said. "I walk through here and I get upset."

On our way back to her showroom, Tarlow showed me a letter she'd got recently from a "competition adviser" who was looking for someone to decorate the new house being built by a computer zillionaire. The letter said, "[Mr. and Mrs. Zillionaire] are preparing to begin the exciting process of design for the interiors of their estate. . . . [Mrs. Zillionaire] will be the driving force behind decision making and shall receive my guidance and council throughout the process. . . . Following my effort to give [Mrs. Zillionaire] extensive exposure to the best design work being done in the country, a list of designers falling within an acceptable range of taste and quality was developed. The selection process will be conducted in a manner that will assure fairness to all invited to participate." The letter was accompanied by a thick, glossy book with color photographs of the construction site.

I said, "Are you going to apply?"

Tarlow looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

TARLOW'S shop is in a little ivy-covered building set half a lot back from the sidewalk. It is open only to the trade, and there is nothing fancy about

it—just lots of furniture and books of fabric swatches scattered around a big, lofty room. Walking in, Tarlow was met by her design assistant, Jane Eschen, who was overseeing a photographer shooting a picture of some of Tarlow's furniture for an ad. The centerpiece of the arrangement was a towering cinnabar Ming cabinet that cost several hundred thousand dollars. Hanging behind it was a Tarlow-designed mirror with a frame that looked as if it were made of gilded tree branches; the mirror cost nine thousand dollars. Eschen showed Tarlow a Polaroid that had been taken to check the arrangement and the lights.

Tarlow said, "This is awful."

Eschen looked at her. Tarlow tapped the picture. "Look. All the white behind it. That cabinet. It doesn't work at all." Tarlow put down her car keys and walked into the center of the shop, where the photographer was standing on a ladder with a silver umbrella.

"Rose," he said, hesitantly.

"We'll fix it," she said. She stood for a moment and looked around the room. She was dressed in a smart navy suit with a short skirt and a pair of high heels. After a moment, she pushed her sleeves up slightly and then hauled a side chair across the room and put it in front of the cabinet, moved a vase that had been sitting on it, and opened the door of the cabinet to block most of the white wall behind it. The photographer took another Polaroid and then showed it to her.

"I hate this chair," she said.

Eschen grimaced and said, "Oh."

"It's too good," Tarlow said. "I hate it."

"We've had it in the line forever," Eschen said.

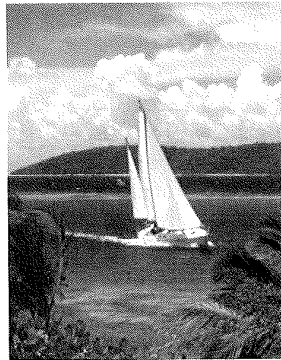
"Well, I hate it," Tarlow said. She pointed at the cabinet and said, "It's not good with that." She hauled the chair back to the other side of the room.

The photographer looked through his viewfinder and said, "Rose, it's great now. You did it."

She took a deep breath and shook her head. She stood back and contemplated the arrangement. Her eyes were squinted and her arms were crossed. Everyone in the room stood still in anticipation. After a moment, she pushed up her sleeves again, strode across the room, moved the cabinet door a quarter of an inch, shifted the vase an eighth of an inch, and then said, "There. It's right now. It's perfect. I couldn't stand it before." ♦

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